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## **Education and Training**

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### **The Air Force Security Cooperation Knowledgebase: A Critical Enabler Moves Into the Future**

**By**

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In 2004, senior Air Force leaders directed the development of a software tracking tool that would allow users within the Air Force Security Cooperation Community, ranging from Action Officers and Attachés to senior leaders and decision makers, to quickly gain a complete overview of all Air Force Security Cooperation and Assistance efforts within a country, region, or even across combatant command (COCOM) lines of responsibility. The senior leaders recognized that there is simply so much information that pertains to security cooperation endeavors that it has been historically difficult, if not impossible, to gain a satisfactory picture of what is really occurring in an area of interest. Information such as security cooperation strategies, foreign military sales (FMS), officer exchanges, education and training programs, and Theater Support Cooperation Management Information System (TSCMIS) data are all examples of elements that are essential to security cooperation endeavors, but have not, until now, been readily accessible through a one-stop shopping informational portal. The Air Force leadership recognized the need for a single, easy to use tool that would serve as a repository to track all the Air Force's Security Cooperation and Assistance activities. The leadership put forth the challenge that this tool be able to quickly and accurately draw together seemingly disparate strands of data to provide both a context and a base of knowledge—critical enablers in the Air Force's efforts of providing security assistance to the nation's partners and allies.

In 2005, Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs (SAF/IA) Long Range Planning Directorate (SAF/IAG) answered this challenge by establishing a Microsoft SharePoint based software portal that pulled together data relating to Air Force Security Cooperation efforts to present in a crisp, yet detailed, format. Christened the Air Force Security Cooperation Knowledgebase (AFSCK), it now provides users an easy to use information repository that tracks an impressive number of the Air Force's security cooperation activities around the world. Residing on both the unclassified NIPRNET and the classified SIPRNET computer systems, it is at the leading edge of information presentation and has been noted for both its convenient user accessibility and its breadth of information regarding security cooperation activities.

The AFSCK however, is not just another software program or web site. Its sophisticated capabilities extend far beyond the simple presentation of data on a computer screen. In fact, throughout the development of the AFSCK one of the primary goals of the Knowledgebase team has been to provide more than just data that was downloaded from databases around the security cooperation community. The Knowledgebase team understands that users are constantly awash in data—so much so, in fact, that it often loses its meaning due to the sheer volume of data at hand. The Knowledgebase however, transforms that data into information by presenting it within a context. In other words, the Knowledgebase team recognized that the content, the simple bits and bytes of the data, was useless unless it could be framed within a context, or environment, that would lend it meaning. Users need

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more than just data, they need a presentation that will serve as a base for knowledge and decision making. This mindset of “information and context over a simple data stream” however, presented numerous challenges because the context in which a user views the information is, according to the user’s needs, constantly changing.

The Knowledgebase team solved these challenges by allowing the users to tailor the information and data to their requirements by simultaneously grouping and presenting data in a manageable and integrated form, while at the same time, allowing the users to look at the data in as much detail as necessary. Although this sounds complex, it is in practice, elegant and straightforward. A good example is how the Knowledgebase deals with large, and often unwieldy, data stores. The Air Force Security Cooperation Strategy is a voluminous and detailed document that is posted, in its entirety, on the AFSCCK. However, if a registered user is looking for information on how the Strategy relates to a specific country, the Knowledgebase provides a page, or view, for every country in the world. This page will then contain a link to the specific section of the Strategy that details the country plan. These country pages of course not only offer the strategy and country plans, but also a trove of additional relevant information that can be used to give the user context regarding security cooperation activities FMS, exchange programs, points of contact, and past bi- and multi-lateral contacts with Air Force leaders are among just a few elements that serve to round out the user’s overview of security cooperation efforts within that country. It is this context which enables more accurate, and in turn, better decision making.

This is however, but one example of the type of context that the Knowledgebase provides as it strives to integrate information from all Air Force Security Cooperation activities. Without question this is an ambitious and ongoing effort. As the amount of data continues to expand, it is critical that the users continue to be given the ability to tailor the amount of information that they wish to see and the context within which they would like to see it. Security cooperation and assistance activities occur throughout many organizations in the Air Force not just within a single department or command. One need only look at the activities within elements ranging from the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) to the Air Staff and to the COCOM components. Many of these organizations frequently use the Knowledgebase and their users have provided feedback to expand the informational base from not just the formal Air Force Security Cooperation Community, but across all Air Force Building Partnership Capacity efforts. The concerted effort that the Knowledgebase team is undertaking to explore this expansion is critical not only to the internal needs of the Air Force, but also in light of “joint” doctrines that demand the need for informational integration and sharing with other services and components.

The developmental philosophy of having the Knowledgebase providing context for the user has benefited the Air Force security cooperation community. With a current user base of approximately 1,500, the team has remained nimble enough to quickly respond to user suggestions for enhancements and embellishments while maintaining the mindset of allowing the users to dictate how they would like to tailor their informational needs to give them the content that yields the context to make decisions regarding security cooperation efforts. The Knowledgebase team is committed to retaining this philosophy in the future as the increasing glut of available data will highlight and demand the ongoing need for users to be able to further refine their own informational picture. Without the context that the Knowledgebase provides, there is a risk that future decisions will be made incorrectly or, equally as troubling, not made at all due to incomplete or an overload of information. Therefore, as the Knowledgebase team looks over the horizon to anticipate the needs of the security cooperation community, the first task is to expand the Knowledgebase to ensure that all of the building partnership capacity activities within the Department of the Air Force are identified, tracked, and available to the users.

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The AFSCCK has been “the leader of the pack” in its ingenuity and employment of the Microsoft SharePoint services and subsequently the Microsoft Office Suite 2007. The Knowledgebase team has lent unique expertise to the Air Force through these skills but with time however, other Department of Defense (DoD), Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), sister-service, COCOM and component organizations have also made strides in perfecting their skills with this new software technology and are in fact starting to field major projects of their own that seek to track, monitor, and present overviews of all defense activities well beyond just those of the Air Force. These efforts represent major investments in information technology and herald, if they are well coordinated and integrated, an exciting step forward in tracking the building partnership capacity efforts of the United States. The Knowledgebase team, while remaining responsible primarily for addressing the needs of the Air Force, must be cognizant of these other DoD projects and ensure that future Knowledgebase development endeavors be mindful of standardization and potential integration.

The Air Force is at a critical juncture in determining how it will, if needed, integrate the AFSCCK with these systems. The size and speed of these DoD developmental efforts dictate that the Air Force Security Cooperation community must ensure that the AFSCCK is poised not only to “pull down” information from the larger systems, but that it in turn can contribute to them by providing timely and accurate information regarding its building partnership capacity activities “upward” and “laterally” to other and larger building partnership capacity tracking systems. The Air Force will always have its own in-house security cooperation activities, but these will be of growing interest to the sister services and DoD and thus, while not formally bound at this time to do so, must be prepared for the day in which content must flow in a constant two-way exchange. It is essential therefore that the Knowledgebase team is dedicated to ensuring information compatibility between the myriad of systems being developed.

It is clear that the current and future trend is toward even more informational integration. The stove-piping and separation of information among the services and other organizations is now a relic of yesteryear and is quickly being swept aside by the DoD and multi-service efforts to provide detailed overviews of all building partnership capacity activities irrespective of geographical, COCOM, or service boundaries.

SAF/IA and the AFSCCK team are well attuned to these trends and potential future needs and will continue to enhance the Knowledgebase to meet the ongoing and immediate requirements of the Air Force Building Partnership Capacity Community. By using the inherent software extensibility of the Knowledgebase, craft and integrate the Knowledgebase to be prepared, when required, to supplement the larger DoD systems.

While this work will not be easy, the common goal of all these systems is to provide governmental and military users the same level of overview and context DoD wide that the AFSCCK is now providing to Air Force users. This goal lends a sense of unity of effort and in this, the AFSCCK will continue to set the lead. The integration of all DoD building partnership capacity activities is not just a dream. It is an achievable goal and the Knowledgebase team is working to ensure that the Air Force is moving in concert with these exciting changes.

### **About the Author**

Lieutenant Colonel Neal A. Schier, USAFR, is a political-military advisor within the Strategy and Long-Range Planning Directorate serving under the Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs. He has been actively involved in the technical and strategy elements of the Air Force Security Cooperation Knowledgebase since 2005. He has over 10,000 hours of military and civilian flying, he has recently authored a book on the challenges airline crews face flying after September 11, 2001.